

A CONSUMER'S GUIDE TO

Auto Repair



CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF CONSUMER AFFAIRS

Bureau of Automotive Repair

www.autorepair.ca.gov • 1-800-952-5210

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If you're like most Californians, you depend on your vehicle just to get through the day. When it needs service or repair—as it occasionally will, no matter how well you maintain it—you want the work done promptly, efficiently, and at a reasonable cost.

You don't need to be an auto repair expert to properly maintain your vehicle. By simply following the tips in this booklet, you can keep your vehicle in good condition and ensure a good working relationship with your auto repair shop.

These tips will also help you protect your rights under the law in the event that you have a problem. We recommend the following:

1. Read and understand your owner's manual.
2. Select a shop you believe can provide the service you need.
3. Know your rights as a consumer.
4. Keep this handy guide in the glove compartment and refer to it before taking your car to a repair shop.



To get more automotive repair advice, be sure to visit the Department of Consumer Affairs' Bureau of Automotive Repair Web site at www.autorepair.ca.gov. We're here to help you Drive Smart, California!

CAR MAINTENANCE DOESN'T HAVE TO BE A WRENCHING EXPERIENCE

Your owner's manual will help you understand the gauges on your dashboard, and will tell you what steps to take if the warning indicators light up. As technology gets more sophisticated, cars are getting better at diagnosing their own mechanical problems. This can help you save money by detecting problems early.

As you drive from day to day, pay attention to anything that's out of the ordinary and deal with it as soon as possible. Most problems get worse with time.

Don't forget that simple and inexpensive procedures like oil changes and tune-ups really can help your car last longer and prevent more serious and expensive problems down the road. It's never too late to familiarize yourself with the recommended maintenance schedule in your owner's manual and follow it.

If you don't have a copy of your owner's manual, call your local car dealership to see if one is available. Many manufacturers allow you to purchase them online as well. It's worth the time to get one.

SELECT A REPAIR SHOP BEFORE YOU NEED IT

One of the best ways to select a repair shop is through word-of-mouth recommendation. Ask your family, friends and work associates what repair shops they like and why.

The Department of Consumer Affairs' Bureau of Automotive Repair can provide information regarding a shop's license status and any disciplinary actions against it. This information is available on the Bureau of Automotive Repair Web site at www.autorepair.ca.gov, or by writing to the Bureau. Consumer organizations may also be able to advise you regarding the track record of a particular repair shop.

If you can, it's a good idea to test the repair shop with a minor maintenance job, such as an oil change. If you're happy with the work and service you receive, you may have found a shop that's right for you.

WHAT MAKES A GOOD REPAIR SHOP?

Here are some tips on what to look for when selecting a repair shop:



Professionalism

- The shop's repair dealer registration and, if applicable, licenses to do Smog Checks, and lamp and brake inspections.
- Other marks of professionalism include membership in an automotive trade organization, or Better Business Bureau, as well as AAA-approved auto repair status.

Shop Appearance

- Neat, well-organized service floors.
- Modern equipment.
- Clearly posted and easily explained policies regarding labor rates, guarantees, and methods of payment.

Personnel

- Courteous, helpful staff.
- Service manager who is willing and able to answer your questions and resolve disputes.
- Qualified technicians with professional certifications such as Automotive Service Excellence (ASE), or other advanced training certificates.

Guarantee

- Finally, ask the service writer or manager if the shop guarantees its work. If they do, ask to see a copy of the guarantee.

Shop Specialty

- Some shops specialize. Ask if the technicians regularly work on the make and model of your car or truck, and make sure they are comfortable doing the type of repair you need—especially if you need major work.



EXPLAIN THE PROBLEM CLEARLY

Remember, you know your vehicle better than anyone does. You probably drive it every day, so you know how it feels when everything is running right. When something is wrong, try to pinpoint for yourself exactly what the symptoms are before taking it in for service. If it helps to remember, write down what you've noticed.

What to Look For

- **Unusual sounds, odors, leaks or smoke**
Where in the vehicle is the abnormal sound coming from? When does it happen? When the engine is running? When the engine is cold? When you're accelerating? Braking? Turning? Going above a certain speed?
- **Problems in handling or braking**
Do you feel vibrations in the steering column or the brake pedal? Does the steering pull to the right or the left? Is your tire tread wearing unevenly?
- **Changes in your vehicle's performance**
Has your engine performance decreased? Is your fuel economy getting worse? Do you regularly

have to add coolant or oil? Are belts or hoses wearing out faster than they should?

Ask Questions

When you're explaining the problem to the technician or service representative, be as detailed as possible. Don't rush or let yourself be intimidated. If you think it will help, bring along a list of the things you've noticed about your vehicle.

Although the technician or service representative probably can't diagnose your problem on the spot, feel free to ask questions. If you don't understand the answers, ask them to clarify.

Make sure the repair shop has a number where you can be reached. If the technician is going to call you later with a diagnosis, ask them when you may expect a call. If you're going to call them, make sure you have the shop's phone number and ask what would be a good time for you to call.

Know Before You Sign

By law, the auto repair shop must provide a written estimate before any work is performed. Find out ahead of time if you will be charged for an estimate. After you receive the estimate, feel free to go to another shop for a second opinion.

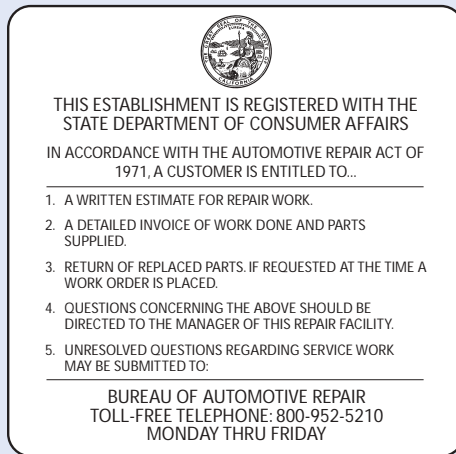
If the technician has an estimate on how much the repair will cost, he or she will ask you to authorize the work ahead of time, up to a specified dollar amount on the work order. When you sign the work order, you are authorizing the shop to repair the problem as stated, and you will be required to pay the cost of repairs up to the specified amount. Make sure you understand what kind of work the technician expects to perform.



Know Your Rights

All auto repair shops in California must be registered with the Department of Consumer Affairs' Bureau of Automotive Repair and every repair shop must post the following sign to inform customers of their rights.

If you don't see the sign, ask to see it.



The Written Estimate or Work Order

When you are given a written estimate, it must include the total estimated price for parts and labor for a specified repair or service. The estimate does not include sales tax.

In addition to the total amount, the estimate may itemize the parts to be used and the method of repair. If so, the repair shop must stick to it. They may not legally substitute parts or change the repair method without your consent.

The dealer or service representative may also make an informal estimate and prepare a work order, showing an estimated price for diagnosis alone, or for diagnosis and repair. A diagnosis is a professional analysis of the vehicle, using procedures established by the auto manufacturer, which is done to determine the cause of the malfunction. Today's technologically advanced

vehicles will often require a diagnosis first, before deciding on a specific repair action.

When you sign a work order, you are liable to pay up to the specified amount for the diagnostic and/or repair services. Do not sign a blank work order.

After the inspection or diagnosis is complete, the shop may call you to describe the work that should be done, to tell you the estimated cost of the work and parts, and to get your verbal authorization to proceed.

If any part of the work is going to be performed at a different shop, it must be noted on the written estimate or work order. For instance, auto body shops sometimes have auto glass shops replace damaged windshields. The shop you authorize to repair your car or truck may not sublet the work without your consent, unless you cannot reasonably be notified.

Giving Your Authorization

No work can be done until you receive an estimate and authorize the repairs by signing a written estimate or work order.



If the technician later determines that additional work will cost more than the original estimate, the additional work may not be done without your consent. Someone from the shop must contact you, describe the additional work and associated costs, and get your permission to proceed.

If you give verbal authorization over the telephone — for instance, by saying “Okay, go ahead” — the shop may proceed with the work, but they must make a notation as follows:

- On the estimate, the shop must indicate that verbal authorization was given, noting the date, time and the name and telephone number of the person who gave the authorization.
- On the invoice, the shop must make the same notation, or, upon completion of repairs, ask you to sign or initial the following statement:

“ I acknowledge notice and oral approval of an increase in the original estimated price. ”

- Instead of a verbal authorization, the shop may make arrangements with you to use email or fax. If this is the case, a copy of your returned email or fax authorizing the additional repairs and/or cost must be attached to the final invoice by the shop.

The Teardown Estimate

For some complex automotive problems, like a transmission failure or auto body repair, the shop may have to take your vehicle apart in order to give you an accurate estimate. This is called a “teardown.”

A teardown estimate must note the following:

- The price of the teardown, including the price of reassembling the vehicle, and the price of replacing gaskets, seals, and other parts destroyed in the teardown process.
- The maximum time it will take the shop to reassemble the vehicle.

After the repair shop determines the needed repairs as a result of the teardown, they must write a second estimate that shows:

- The estimated price for parts and labor for the recommended repair.
- The parts required for the recommended repair.

The shop will then contact you for permission to do the repairs. If you decide not to proceed with the work, they must reassemble the car at no further cost and within the maximum time stated on the teardown estimate.

The Invoice

When the repair job is finished, you will receive an invoice, which must show the shop's name, address, and auto repair dealer registration number.



All work performed, including any work done under warranty at no charge, must be listed on the invoice.

Labor and parts must be itemized separately, and each part must be clearly identified. It must be noted if any used, reconditioned, or rebuilt parts were used. Sales tax is included as a separate item.

Return of Old Parts

At the time you sign the written estimate or work order, you may request that the shop return to you any parts that are replaced. The shop is required by law to return the parts to you only if you request them before the work is done.

If the shop installs a rebuilt part, the old part is usually returned to the supplier as partial payment for the rebuilt part. This payment is called a “core” charge. If you want the old part back, you may have to pay the “core” charge.

If any replaced parts must be returned to the supplier under a warranty arrangement, those parts will not be returned to you. But, you have a right to see them if a charge is being made for replacement.

Guarantees

A repair shop is not required by law to guarantee its work, but many shops do offer a guarantee. If work is guaranteed, it must be in writing. A written guarantee should show the following:

- The name and address of the business making the guarantee.
- What the guarantee is promising to do (e.g., repair or replace the failed part, or refund your money).
- What you must do to have the guarantee honored (e.g., return the car to the place of service, or pay a service charge).
- The effective time period of the guarantee (e.g., 90 days from the date of repair).
- The items that are covered or excluded.
- Whether the guarantee is prorated (adjusted for time or mileage).
- Whether the guarantee is transferable to the new owner if you sell your vehicle.

Dropping Off Your Car When the Shop Is Closed

If you need to drop off your car when the shop is closed —such as very early in the morning or as a result of being towed in after a breakdown—try to call ahead of time so the service manager knows the car is coming. Make arrangements to leave the keys in a safe place. Leave a note with your telephone number, describing the repair or service you need. The repair shop must contact you with an estimate and get your permission before doing any work.



If You Have a Problem

If you are dissatisfied with the repair work, ask to speak directly with the service manager. It is often easier and quicker to resolve the matter directly with the repair shop.



Keep these tips in mind:

- Know your rights, as defined by the Bureau of Automotive Repair (see above).
- Be courteous and calm.
- Explain the problem accurately, and tell the manager what you think would be a fair settlement.
- If you are willing to negotiate, say so. In many disputes, neither party is 100% right.
- If the problem cannot be resolved to your satisfaction, tell the manager you intend to file a complaint with the Bureau of Automotive Repair.

How to File a Complaint

In 1971, the Department of Consumer Affairs' Bureau of Automotive Repair was established to prevent abuses in the auto repair industry. The Bureau of Automotive Repair gives consumers a formal way to seek third-party mediation assistance for problems they are having with repair shops.

If you cannot solve a problem with a repair shop, you may want to file a formal complaint with the Bureau of Automotive Repair. Here's how to file a complaint:

- Go to the Bureau of Automotive Repair Web site at www.autorepair.ca.gov and fill out the complaint form online, or call 1-800-952-5210 to have a complaint form sent to you. Complete the form and return it to the address listed on the form.

- Save all your receipts; they may be helpful when the Bureau of Automotive Repair reviews your complaint.

The following steps will be taken once the Bureau of Automotive Repair receives your complaint:

- The Bureau of Automotive Repair will assign a case number to it.
- Within 10 days, you will receive notification acknowledging receipt of your complaint and identifying the Bureau of Automotive Repair representative assigned to your case.
- The Bureau of Automotive Repair representative will review the complaint and contact you.
- A Bureau of Automotive Repair supervisor also will review your complaint to see if it appears that the shop has violated the Automotive Repair Act or any other laws.
- The Bureau of Automotive Repair representative assigned to your case will attempt to mediate on your behalf with the repair shop. While the Bureau of Automotive Repair cannot represent you in court, collect money, or levy fines on your behalf, the Bureau of Automotive Repair representative will contact the owner or manager of the repair shop, describe your complaint, and attempt to facilitate a mutually agreeable resolution to your complaint.
- The mediation effort may require the Bureau of Automotive Repair representative to contact you and the repair shop several times. Both parties will be kept informed about the case.
- If it appears that any violations of the Automotive Repair Act have occurred, the Bureau of Automotive Repair representative will attempt to secure the necessary documentation (evidence) to substantiate whether the Bureau of Automotive Repair advises the repair shop manager, or in more serious cases,

whether the Bureau of Automotive Repair opens a formal investigation.

- A final mediated resolution will be confirmed with both you and the repair shop, and both parties will be notified, by phone, in person, or by mail when the case is closed.

Each year, the Bureau of Automotive Repair negotiates more than \$5 million in rework, refunds, and adjustments on behalf of California consumers. If you feel you have a complaint requiring investigation, please contact us. We'll help you check it out.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Check out the Bureau of Automotive Repair Web site at www.autorepair.ca.gov, or call toll-free at **1-800-952-5210**.

You may order an additional copy of this publication without charge, subject to availability, by writing to DCA Publications, 401 S Street, Suite 100, Sacramento, CA 95814, or by calling **1-916-323-7239** or toll-free at **1-800-952-5210**.

This publication is also available on our Web site under "Top Clicks for Consumers." It may also be copied if: (1) the meaning of copied text is not changed or misrepresented; (2) credit is given to the Department of Consumer Affairs, Bureau of Automotive Repair; and (3) all copies are distributed free of charge.

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